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By David Bedard

176th Wing Public Affairs

176th Wing Religious Support Team helps by building bridges

JOINT BASE ELMENDORF-RICHARDSON, Alaska — The 176th Wing Religious Support Team, comprising three chaplains and three enlisted religious affairs Airmen, is an integral part of the 176th Wing Wellness Center.

Full-time Chaplain (Maj.) Bradford Burns said the RST provides access or can coordinate access for all wing members to religious services for all faiths.

"A lot of our job is to walk around and create relationships (Unit Visitation)," he said. "Many people see a chaplain, and they think strictly religion. That's not the case."

According to Air Force instructions, RSTs provide for the First Amendment right of freedom of religion, and they also advise leadership on matters of faith, ethics and moral decision making.

"The Chaplain Corps mission statement is, 'While serving as a visible reminder of the Holy, the Air Force Chaplain Corps provides spiritual care and the opportunity for Air Force members and their families to exercise their constitutional right to freedom of religion,'" Burns said. "Chaplain's core capabilities are spiritual care and to advise leadership."

Burns said the secret sauce to his outreach efforts are his Religious Affairs Airmen like Master Sgt. Bethany Marcum. He said she is able to approach enlisted Guardsmen who may be struggling but don't feel comfortable talking to an officer about their problems.

"We make relationships with people so that they realize we are here to come alongside them," he said. "Any struggle anybody may have in their hearts – anything that makes them not be a spiritually whole person, we will counsel them and work them through it in accordance with their faith tradition or in accordance with their no-faith tradition."

Of course, as a member of the clergy holding an advanced degree in theological studies, Burns offers a wide range of religious services to all faiths including pre-marital counseling, weddings, marital counseling and baptisms, to name a few.

"Any religious rite afforded in the civilian side is afforded in the National Guard," Burns said. "We provide the service or provide for the service."

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Burns said he doesn't pretend to have the knowledge or the capability to personally and directly provide for all faiths. However, he has access to a broad network of chaplains on the base as well as clergy outside the gates representing dozens of religious traditions.

Burns also helps Airmen with religious accommodations such as religious adherents who are required to wear a beard. He meets with the Airman, evaluates the need, and works with the command to provide for the allowance.

As a member of the wing commander's special staff, one of Burns' duties is to advise commanders, senior enlisted advisors and superintendents. He said he advises leaders on everything from making moral decisions involving tough situations to ethically administering discipline.

"Sometimes, they have a hard time balancing that, and they need a safe place and a sounding board to do that," he said.

Undergirding that safe place is the doctrine of privileged communication, which is extended to anyone who comes to a chaplain in confidence. Burns said the principle is absolute, whereas there are some confidential limitations when talking to military law or psychological health professionals.

He said absolute confidentiality is especially helpful when a wing member has been the victim of a crime and wants to talk about it with someone without fear the incident being reported without their consent.

Burns said the RST stands ready to help all wing members find wellness and balance.

"I'm not here to convert you; I'm here to help you with who you are, where you are, and how you want to get it done," he said. "Whatever that means to you, that's how we do it. Internally, I know the best way is something faith-based, but that's not to say that if people work hard, they can't master communication and other skills that help them in life."

For questions about the RST or to schedule an appointment, call (907) 551-1049 or email bradford.burns.3@us.af.mil.

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PHOTOS

1. **Attached pdf** includes story and a small selection of low-resolution photos for viewing on screen.
2. **DVIDS link** includes selected full-resolution photos. (Accessible from military computers.)

<https://www.dvidshub.net/news/384961/176th-wing-religious-support-team-helps-building-bridges>



Alaska Air National Guard Chaplain (Maj.) Bradford Burns is the full-time chaplain for 176th Wing. The 176th Wing Religious Support Team comprises three chaplains and three religious affairs Airmen, and provides services for all religious faiths. (U.S. Air National Guard photo by David Bedard/Released)